THE COMFORT AND JOY OF HOME
December 4, 2005

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Psalm 85
Isaiah 40:1–11
Mark 1:1–8

"Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God."
Isaiah 40:1 (NRSV)

We ask, Lord, for ourselves the most meaningful
Advent season we have ever known.
Drive us to our knees;
to the Book;
to an awareness of our sin;
to a careful searching of our virtues;
to a serious examination of words and
terms so glibly sung and spoken.
And grant that when Christmas morning breaks for us this
year, we may have something more to show
for our much running about than tired
feet, wrapped presents, and regrets for cards not sent.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Ernest T. Campbell
Where Cross the Crowded Ways: Prayers of a City Pastor

In this busiest time of year, O God,
we come here this morning to be reminded of your love,
your gift of grace, your incarnation.
We come to be reminded again of your advent
and your mysterious coming into the world
in Bethlehem but also into our world.
So, startle us again with your truth,
in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

There is simply no more potent idea than the idea of home. The idea of home, and homecoming, is at the heart of great literature, from the *Odyssey* to *Look Homeward, Angel,* and great music, from Dvorak's magnificent Ninth Symphony, *From the New World,* with its haunting Largo we know as "Going Home," to spirituals first sung by slaves violently wrenched from

their homes and villages—“Swing Low, Sweet Chariot, Comin’ for to Carry Me Home”—and, of course, popular songs such as “I’ll Be Home for Christmas,” written in 1943 when millions of young Americans were far from home, scattered all over a world at war.

> I’ll be home for Christmas
> You can count on me. . . .
> Christmas Eve will find me
> Where the love light gleams.
> I’ll be home for Christmas
> If only in my dreams.

When her family takes a trip, eleven-year-old Rachel, with Down Syndrome, after two days or so, gets up in the morning and announces, “Home now.” Her family moved recently, and for a while Rachel got up every morning and said, “Home now,” and it was a good and important step when her family’s new residence became “home.”

Episcopal priest and popular author Barbara Brown Taylor says,

> My house is much more than my residence. It is my sanctuary, the place where I rest; where I retire beyond the reach of the noisy world, where I am fed. It is where my bed is and my books and my Great Aunt Alma’s quilts. My house is a promise I make to myself when I get too tired to go on—“you can go home now.” (*The Preaching Life,* p. 156)

Frederick Buechner, who thinks and writes a lot about home, says that home is the place “where you feel, or did once feel, uniquely at home, which is to say a place where you belong, where you feel that all is somehow ultimately well even if things aren’t going all that well at any given moment” (*The Longing for Home*, Preface).

I read last week the letters Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in Advent 1943 to his parents and friends from his Nazi prison cell, where he was imprisoned until his execution. He writes a lot about home.

To a friend in the German army: “How marvelous that you are home for Advent! I can imagine your singing hymns together” (p. 101).

A few days later, he wrote, “I wonder where we shall both be for Christmas?” (p. 103)

And finally, near Christmas, “There have been a few occasions in my life when I have had to learn what homesickness means. There is no agony worse than this. During the months in prison I have sometimes been terribly homesick” (p. 112).

One of my favorite Garrison Keillor Prairie Home Companion monologues is "Exiles," published in a book, *Leaving Home*: "Dozens of exiles returned [home to Lake Wobegon] for Christmas." Corrine Ingquist drove up from Minneapolis and instead of grading papers baked cookies and little currant buns. "She hadn't had them since she was little—amazing: a delicious smell from childhood that brings back every sweet old aunt and grandma as if they're there beside you, and you do it with a little saffron (p. 183).

There is, quite simply, no more emotionally evocative, powerful, or important idea than home, and we will all, in some way, go—as we carefully rehearse customs precious in our families, as we bake the cookies, decorate the tree, lovingly place the last remaining ornament from the first ones we purchased decades ago—we will all go home, if, as the song says, only in our dreams.

Six centuries before the birth of Jesus, God's people were dreaming of home. The Babylonians had defeated their nation; devastated their holy city, Jerusalem; leveled God's temple; and driven the people across the desert to live in Babylonian captivity, exiles. In Babylon, God's people longed to go home; they remembered how it used to be at home in Jerusalem. They sang the old songs. They told the old stories to their children every evening. One of their psalmists wrote what I think may be the most poignant sentences in the Bible:

> By the rivers of Babylon —
> there we sat down and there we wept
> when we remembered Zion. . . .
> If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
> let my right hand wither!
> Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth
> if I do not remember you,
> if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy. (Psalm 137)

It is the theme of the great Advent hymn:

> O come, O come, Emmanuel,
> and ransom captive Israel
> that mourns in lonely exile here.

And then a letter arrived in the exile community, written by one of their greatest poets, a prophet who somehow remained back in burned-out Jerusalem. The letter he wrote begins at the fortieth chapter of the book of the prophet Isaiah with words made familiar not only because we read them every Advent, but because George Frideric Handel chose them to introduce his oratorio *Messiah:*

Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem.

The prophet paints a vivid picture: a highway will be built across the desert, every valley will be lifted up, every mountain and hill made low, the rough places will be smooth—and over that highway, a procession will move. Banners and trumpets will announce the coming of the king, returning to Jerusalem. “Get you to the high mountain,” the herald commands. “Lift up your voice; say to the cities of Judah, ‘Here is your God!’”

The exiles are going home again. The effect of that letter when it arrived in the exile community must have been electric. Men stood tall again, mothers told their children the stories that night with a promise: “We’re going home soon. Here is our God!” Grandmothers began to gather up the family belongings: “We’re going home!”

But wait, the prophet says. Wait a minute. This picture is not quite right: the royal potentate riding on his war horse, preceded by banners and trumpets, victoriously proceeding across the desert toward home. What comes next is one of the most dramatic, radical moves in all of literature.

He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them on his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep.

If that’s God, it is a very different notion of who God is. The royal potentate, powerful king riding a war horse in proud procession, trumpet blaring, banners unfurled—that’s everybody’s favorite image of God. But a shepherd, tenderly speaking, carrying lambs in his arm, gently leading—that is a very different, very radical theology.

The God of the most popular religiosity currently, the vengeful, wrathful violent God of the *Left Behind* series of apocalyptic best sellers about the end time and the second coming of Christ, is terrifying. This God’s coming, this second coming, will be bloody, powerful, violent. “Can it be, in contrast to what so many want to believe,” Kathleen Norris asks, “that mercy is really at the heart of God?” (“Living by the Word,” *Christian Century,* 13 December 2005).

Cynthia Rigby, who teaches theology at Austin Presbyterian Seminary, one of an important new generation of Presbyterian thinkers, reflected quite personally recently on these radical images. Rigby, mother of a two-year-old, was expecting her second child and wondered about her ability to

comfort and love and hold two babies without dropping one: “How many lambs can the shepherd carry?” she asks. “Does the comfort of the mighty One ever run dry? While my capacity to comfort my children has exceeded anything I thought possible, I know there is a limit. The One we are expecting has no such limits” (See Austin Seminary’s *In This Season: Advent Reflections*).

A God who says, “Comfort, comfort my people,” a shepherd who tenderly speaks and carries the lambs in his arm and gently leads his flock home—that is a radical theology, a radical notion of how God acts, a radical notion of what it means to love and follow Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

In our Tutoring program recently, two young boys, a seventh grader and a fifth grader, got into a fight. It started, as these things often do, with an exchange of insults, escalated to pushing and shoving until leaders intervened and separated them, then a few minutes later reescalated to punching and choking. Tutors pulled the boys apart, sat them down in opposite corners of the dining room, tried to contact parents, only partially successfully. Now we’re trying to figure out how to be helpful. And as I read the report, I thought about the image of masculinity—what it means to be a man—our culture has given these boys. I thought about the images of manhood to which they are exposed for hour after hour every day on television, in video games, on the streets where they live, in the gangs to which their older brothers belong. I thought about that repulsive billboard advertisement for the movie *Get Rich or Die Trying*, with an African American man, muscled, tattooed back, with a pistol in his hand, and I wondered if those boys had ever witnessed masculinity as gentleness, strength expressed not in macho, tough-guy, in your face rage, but in tenderness. I wondered if they had ever experienced or seen manhood expressed in kindness.

It is not only a radical notion of God, but an equally radical and redeeming notion of what a human being is, what God intends people to be.

“Comfort, O comfort, says your God,” the prophet wrote. Comfort: you’re going home now, and it is impossible to read these beautiful Advent words without thinking about those who have no home and the moral implications for those of us who do.

One of the most effective advocates for the homeless in Chicago died last week, Patty Crowley, ninety-two. Patty, who lived in the Hancock building, was an important woman in Chicago—a devout Roman Catholic who all her life faithfully but consistently questioned and challenged her church’s positions on women’s issues and birth control. In the 1960s, she and her late husband, Pat, were one of three lay couples to be invited to serve on the Papal Birth Control Commission, whose ultimate report recommended

that the Church's position on contraception, birth control, family planning, be modified—a report the Vatican rejected. Homelessness was her passion, particularly homeless women. When Patty saw a homeless woman rummaging in a trash barrel outside Bloomingdale's, she became morally indignant. And so Patty founded and organized Deborah's Place. In fact she visited me shortly after I arrived and convinced Fourth Church to be a charter member and funder, and today Deborah's Place is a large and very effective and faithful provider of shelter and services for homeless women. Last week I was at a meeting the day of her funeral and could not attend the service. But on Monroe, between State and Dearborn, I saw a homeless woman, a guest of Deborah's Place for years. She's dirty, disheveled, sitting on the sidewalk eating a sandwich, but she's alive—thanks to Patty.

Homelessness in this affluent culture is a disgrace. For Christians, it is a moral issue, a spiritual issue. And much of the good work of the Elam Davies Social Service Center here at Fourth Church deals with homeless men and women. There are, by the way, an average of 6,067 people out there sleeping on the streets of Chicago on any given night. Altogether, there are 166,000 people who experience homelessness in the metropolitan area annually. Our program here, which you support with your gifts, is important. Our Social Service Center welcomes 6,600 people yearly, serves 4,500 lunches, and 4,200 Sunday Night Suppers; 64 people receive clothing monthly. And of our 1,587 registered guests who come regularly for services, for a sandwich and cup of soup, a place to get warm on a cold day, a place to get a coat, a pair of gloves, use the bathroom, take a shower, talk to someone who will listen and not sneer or walk by, of those 1,600 guests, 800 of them are homeless, and for them, this church is the closest thing to home in their lives. We do our best to find them shelter. And our staff persons work with guests to facilitate transitional housing, employment, support services, and permanent housing—home, that is. Pending your support, Fourth Church will be a participant—the first church to do so, I understand—in Mayor Daley's plan to end homelessness in Chicago by sponsoring two families over a two-year period designed to move them from homelessness to permanent housing.

Kathleen Norris remembers seeing a slick full-page Christmas advertisement in a magazine last year. The ad, which was for a "beaded handbag costing thousands of dollars, featured a model with her eyes closed, looking beautiful but comatose, as the words 'Comfort and Joy' blazed across the page." Norris, who's not much for luxury these days, whimsically wondered whether that beaded handbag was actually capable of producing comfort and joy and doubted that it could.

The good news of Advent comes in ancient words:

Comfort, comfort my people—

You are going home.
A shepherd will lead you home
and carry the lambs, carry any who,
for whatever reason, can't make it on their own.
Comfort, comfort—
One is coming who speaks tenderly and gathers up all who stumble and fall, all who are sick, all who labor and are heavily burdened, all who are weary, sad, all this morning who are ill and frightened, all whose illness is critical and final, all who are anxious and worried, all who are discouraged and depressed, all who are alone and lonely and homesick. One is coming who gathers them all up and gently leads them—all of them, all of us—home.

His parents were homeless, after all. They left their home in Nazareth to travel all the way to Bethlehem and after that to Egypt. In Bethlehem, they made a home for their child as best they could. They wrapped him in bands of swaddling cloths to keep him warm and secure. They laid him in a manger and watched over him and kept him safe.

And, somehow, beneath it all, you and I know, that there, in Bethlehem, in the night, as he is born, we are, all of us, finally at home.

Cynthia Rigby, waiting for her second baby to arrive, wrote, "The baby born to Mary—the one who is picked up and nursed and guided by her—is himself overflowing in his capacity to offer comfort. Filled with the yearning of a mother for her child, our shepherd never ceases to speak tenderly to us, reminding us of whose we are."

In him, in his love, we are finally home.

Tidings of comfort and joy.

O God, we are, most of us, far from the homes where we began, where we were loved and nurtured. Those homes live in memory. As we return again this year, may we know our true home, our true comfort and highest joy, in Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord. Amen.